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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews how various nonstandard dialects of English may influence written products and how writing may be taught to speakers of such dialects. Sections of the literature review focus on the speech patterns of black English, of other English dialects, and of other languages, and on how these patterns manifest themselves in written English. Other sections of the paper discuss comparisons of common error patterns across dialects, the arguments for and against students' right to their own language (the bidialectic approach), and suggestions for teaching English to students who do not speak standard English. The approaches to writing instruction that are suggested include (1) ignoring dialect influences and focusing instead on the writing process, on the rhetorical situation, and on the goals of writing; (2) including instruction on dialects in the composition curriculum, noting their appropriate use in certain kinds of writing, such as personal letters; (3) advocating the use of English-as-a-second-language techniques to help remove dialect influences on writing; and (4) combining the approaches in an eclectic manner that reflects the variety of students and their linguistic differences. (RL)

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DIALECT AND WRITING: A REVIEW

Bruce Cronnell

ABSTRACT

Students who do not speak Standard English may have problems when learning to write English. The influence of speech on writing in English is reviewed for Black English, for other English dialects, and for other languages. Views on "students' right to their own language" are discussed, and suggestions are presented for teaching English to students who do not speak Standard English.

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DIALECT AND WRITING: A REVIEW

Bruce Cronnell

Learning to write is important for all students in American society. However, learning to write is difficult for many students. Because written English and spoken English are related (albeit imperfectly) and because Standard English underlies written English, students who do not speak Standard English may have more trouble learning to write than students who do speak Standard English. This paper reviews how various non-standard dialects of English may influence written products and how writing may be taught to speakers of such dialects.

Black English and Writing

The dialect that has been studied most is Black English--the dialect of low-income blacks across the United States. Studies have consistently found that Black English features are manifested--to some degree--in the writing of Black English speakers.

More Black English features have been found in the spelling of young black children than in the writing of older black children, adolescents, and college students. Sullivan (1971) and Kligman and Cronnell (1974) found various pronunciation features reflected in the spelling of second graders. Carney (1979), looking at first, second, and third graders, also found numerous pronunciation features reflected in children's spelling. These results are understandable: Young children have small spelling vocabularies; as they try to spell words that they have not learned to spell automatically (cf. Smith, 1972), they must depend on their pronunciation to determine how to spell the words. (In fact, Kligman and

Cronnell used young children and unfamiliar words so that the children would be forced to use pronunciation as a basis for spelling.) For example, students who pronounce "mouth" as /mauf/ (instead of /mauθ/) and who are not familiar with the conventional spelling of the word may well spell the last sound as f (rather than th) when they depend on their pronunciation of the word to guide their spelling.

However, most children soon learn that their pronunciation cannot always serve as the basis for their spelling. For example, all children must learn that although they do not hear or say /b/ at the end of "climb," they must write a b there. Black English speakers may have to learn more spellings that do not conform to their pronunciations of the words (cf. Burling, 1970). Moreover, Black English speakers do not necessarily use only one pronunciation of a word. The variability of Black English has been well documented (cf. Berdan, 1981, for a discussion); children may say /maut/ or /mauθ) as well as /mauf/, and they may use their knowledge of such variation to spell words in the conventional forms.

As students get older, they seem to make fewer misspellings that are directly related to their speech. Groff (1978) replicated one of Kligman and Cronnell's (1974) studies (Kligman, Cronnell, & Verna, 1972) and found that Black English was less commonly reflected in the spelling of fourth and sixth graders. However, pronunciation may continue to affect, to some degree, the spelling of older students. O'Neal and Trabasso (1976) found that some final consonants that are uncommon in Black English speech were occasionally not represented in the spelling of third and fifth grade students; similar findings are reported by D. G. Briggs (1969) for high school students.

However, all studies consistently report that certain inflectional suffixes (e.g., -s, -'s, -ed) are frequently not found in writing--as they are also frequently not found in the speech of Black English speakers. The studies reported by Kligman and Cronnell (1974) demonstrated that inflectional suffixes (but not derivational suffixes) resulted in Black English spellings and that morphology (not pronunciation) was reflected in such spellings (e.g., although both "past" and "passed" might be pronounced /pæs/, the former was generally spelled with t while the latter was commonly spelled without -ed).

In addition to the findings of Kligman and Cronnell among second graders, lack of inflectional suffixes in the writing of Black English speakers has been found among students in grades 4-6 (Groff, 1978; Ross, 1971), among high school students (D. G. Briggs, 1969; Wolfram & Whiteman, 1971), among community college students (Funkhouser, 1976), among college students (O. D. Briggs, 1969; Collins, 1971; Goppert, 1975; Weaver, 1974), and among nine-year-olds, 13-year-olds, 17-year-olds, and adults 25 and older (Whiteman, 1976).

The Black English features discussed above are related to the orthographic representation of words--how words are spelled or whether suffixes are present. However, a number of other features also characterize Black English; e.g., invariant be, copula deletion, ain't, multiple negation. Such features rarely occur in writing (Collins, 1971; Funkhouser, 1976; Goppert, 1975; Raybern, 1975; Ross, 1971; Whiteman, 1976). Researchers generally hypothesize that student writers are aware of these more obvious, more stigmatized whole-word variants and are thus able to avoid their use in writing (DeStephano, 1972; Funkhouser, 1976; Smitherman, 1970). (However,

Eckert, 1981, notes that when writers avoid such forms, they may use awkward structures because they do not know the appropriate Standard English versions of the stigmatized forms.)

The research in Black English, consequently, indicates that Black English is commonly reflected in the writing of inflectional suffixes, sometimes reflected in the spelling of sounds within words (especially for young writers), and rarely reflected in the use of whole-word forms or in complex syntactic structures.

Black English stylistic and rhetorical features might also be found in writing. However, such features have not been well described for oral language and have even more rarely been described for writing (Smitherman, 1973). Weaver (1974) notes that Black college students often make unusual use of derivational morphemes; this characteristic, she believes, may be a "reflection of oral 'fancy talk' tradition" (p. 8; see Dillard, 1972, for a discussion of fancy talk):

> The main characteristic of fancy talk seems to be flashy vocabulary, vocabulary which to mainstream speakers often seems ornate to the point of misuse and even malapropism . . .. (Weaver, 1974, p. 8)

Cooper (1977) claims that Black college students use three stylistic features that derive from Black cultural tradition: imagery (even in non-descriptive writing); rhythmic patterns in prose; "personal involvement" (i.e., extensive use of first person).

Other Dialects and Writing

While Black English has received considerable research attention, other dialects of English have not fared so well. However, the limited available research does indicate that dialects other than Black English also affect writing.

Three studies have looked at regional dialects: Boiarsky (1969) at Appalachian speech; Graham and Rudorf (1970) at the dialects of Ohio, Massachusetts, and Georgia; Stever (1980) at dialect in Virginia. All found that spelling errors were related--in some degree--to dialect pronunciations.

A study of the English spoken by two American Indian tribes found that oral forms influenced written forms (Wolfram, Christian, Leap, and Potter, 1979; Potter, 1981); most of the influence was on spelling and morphology.

Heath (1981) has studied two rural-oriented communities in southern Appalachia, one white and one black. She found that the communities' different oral story-telling styles were reflected in the writing styles of students.

Other Languages and Writing in English

Speakers of other languages frequently do not speak English in a standard fashion; consequently, their oral English (which is influenced by their native language) may affect their written English.

Lay (1975) contrasts English and Mandarin Chinese; it is not clear how (or whether) these differences affect writing in English. Two studies of Hebrew speakers found different effects. Bassan (1973) found that the spellings of third-grade Hebrew speakers could be more easily accounted for by analysis of the English spelling system than by interference from Hebrew. Michelson (1974) found that the vowel misspellings of college students reflected the pronunciation of Hebrew speakers.

In the United States, Spanish is the non-English language most commonly spoken, but its influence on written English has not been studied

much. Rizzo and Villafane (1975) list and illustrate many Spanish-English contrasts that influence writing, but they give no indication of the relative importance or frequency of these features. Alvarez (1974) looked at the pronunciation and spelling of Mexican-American second graders; "deviant" pronunciations were found reflected in misspellings. However, in a study in progress, Edelsky (1981) indicates no major effects from Spanish on the English writing of bilingual Mexican-American third graders. Amastae (1981) found that by the time bilingual Mexican-American reach college, Spanish influences are rarely detected in their writing. However, Herrick (1981) found Spanish influences in the writing of bilingual college students who had not been born in the United States; like other researchers, he noted the omission of inflectional suffixes.

Scollon and Scollon (1979) argue that writing an essay (in the native language or in English) is difficult for Athabaskan Indians because the oral communication style of the Athabaskan culture does not permit speaking to an unknown audience, speaking as an expert, or speaking for a long time--all common practices in writing. However, the Scollons do not provide evidence that such constraints actually affect the writing of Athabaskans.

Comparisons Among Dialects

Most of the studies reported above looked at the speech and writing (or just the writing) of nonstandard speakers and found that certain aspects of speech were reflected in writing. However, might these features also be found in the writing of Standard English speakers? The answer appears to be a qualified yes: Written features that reflect spoken nonstandard dialects are also found in the writing of standard speakers, but not so frequently.

Kligman and Cronnell (1974) found that spelling errors related to Black English were made by middle-class, suburban, white children, but that lower-class, urban, black children made these errors much more frequently. Whiteman (1976) found that both black and white students omitted inflectional suffixes (such omission is a feature of spoken Black English but not of most white dialects); however, black students omitted them more frequently. She concluded "that in addition to influence from the spoken language system of the writer (i.e., dialect influence), there is also a non-dialect-specific tendency to omit in writing certain inflectional suffixes . . ." (pp. 2-3).

The differences between groups seem much less when students are in remedial college writing classes. Kirschner and Poteet (1973) looked at fourteen kinds of errors in the writing of black, Hispanic, and white remedial students in an urban community college. The mean number of non-standard sentences did not differ among the groups, nor did the rank order of the error types in terms of number of sentences with errors. However, the authors did not differentiate errors within categories; moreover, some of the categories should not be expected to show dialect effects (e.g., capitalization, fragments, run-on sentences).

Hammons (1974) looked at the writing of black, American Indian, and white college freshmen and found the writing of Indians and whites to be similar, but the writing of blacks to be more influenced by nonstandard features.

Sternglass (1974a, b) studied the writing of black and white students in remedial freshman writing classes. With the exception of black use of invariant <u>be</u>, blacks and whites used the same nonstandard features, but blacks used them more frequently.

Shaughnessy (1977), a foremost authority on the teaching of writing to remedial college freshmen (primarily "new," "nontraditional," or "disadvantaged" students), claims that

> Most students, whether they started out speaking Chinese or BEV [Black English Vernacular] or Navajo, seem to end up in freshman English with a common stock of errors that appear most often to arise directly from interference from other languages and dialects, from problems of predictability within the system called formal English, or from the difficulties associated with writing rather than speaking English. (p. 157)

Thus, all students may have the same basic writing problems, but speakers of nonstandard dialects may have these problems more abundantly.

Cooper (1980b) found differences between field-dependent ("holistic") students and field-independent ("analytic") students. Field-dependent students tend to use less classification than field-independent students, less distancing (i.e., use first and second persons more), more description and figurative language, and more "transitional features" (inaccurate use of Standard English; hyper-corrections). The writing style of field-dependent students is not the standard school style, which is more like the style of field-independent students. Cooper (1980a) claims that minority groups (specifically, blacks and Mexican-Americans) tend to include large numbers of field-dependent thinkers, who consequently have problems with school writing because of their divergent style.

Students' Right to Their Own Language

If students' dialects influence their writing, it has traditionally been assumed that students must change their writing--must correct their "errors." Another way of approaching dialect and writing is to suggest that students learn a second dialect--Standard English--for use in their

writing. (Ignored here is the issue of whether they also need to speak Standard English.) In this view, students who speak non-standard dialects must become "bidialectal."

This view is probably held by most people in industry, by most teachers, and by most of the public. Dialect usage in writing just is not accepted--except from a few professional writers, writing mostly about racial/ethnic matters and writing primarily in literary forms.

However, some (highly vocal) members of the English teaching profession have argued against bidialectalism and against the eradication of dialect from writing (e.g., O'Neil, 1972; Sledd, 1969, 1972). They argue that bidialectalism is just another manifestation of "white supremacy" (Sledd, 1969); that forcing students to write in Standard English is another form of majority-group oppression of minority groups.

The proponents of these arguments were strengthened by the Conference on College Composition and Communication (a part of the National Council of Teachers of English), which adopted a resolution on "Students' right to their own language":

> We affirm the students' right to their own patterns and varieties of language--the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style. Language scholars long ago denied that the myth of a standard American dialect has any validity. The claim that any one dialect is unacceptable amounts to an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another. Such a claim leads to false advice for speakers and writers, and immoral advice for humans. A nation proud of its diverse heritage and its cultural and racial variety will preserve its heritage of dialects. We affirm strongly that teachers must have the experiences and training that will enable them to respect diversity and uphold the right of students to their own language. (Committee on CCCC Language Statement, 1974, pp. 2-3)

As might be expected, this statement created (and continues to create) considerable controversy, with heightened passions on both sides of the argument. Nearly everyone agrees that students' native oral language should not be destroyed. But there is less agreement as to whether students' native language should be permitted (much less encouraged) in writing.

The arguments are highly emotional and political. Those who argue for standard rather than dialect forms in writing (i.e., for "correctness") are often accused of inhumane destruction of students' souls. Those who argue for a laissez faire approach are accused of denying students the opportunity to move into mainstream society. The literature is filled with opposing arguments--and no definitive solution.

Clearly, emphasizing form and ignoring content will not help students become good writers. On the other hand, for most readers, text that is riddled with nonstandard usage will be less easily read. A middle ground is needed--one that recognizes the value of the students' native language forms, but also recognizes the value of certain standards of good written usage.

Speech and Writing: What Is the Connection?

The research suggests that nonstandard speech may be reflected in the writing of many students. Hartwell (1980) has cogently argued that dialect does not interfere with writing. He sees writing as a global process and suggests that the writing problems of linguistically different students result from their lack of familiarity with print code. Consequently, he believes that writing should be taught with an emphasis

on meaning. Two respondents to Hartwell's article agree with the importance of meaning, but one would put more emphasis on meaning (Collins, 1988) while the other would also include some emphasis on the control of basic skills (Freedman, 1980). These differences in emphasis are similar to those discussed under "Students' right to their own language."

Whiteman (1979) argues that interference suggests separate language systems and is an inappropriate term for discussing the effects of dialect on writing. (However, although she does not discuss the possibility, interference may be the appropriate term for discussing the effects of other languages on writing in English.) Whiteman suggests that dialect influences writing, but does not interfere with ability to write. Potter (1981) also argues that dialect does not interfere with the ability to communicate, although it may influence the form of communication.

Most of the research has focused on the surface effects of dialect. While such effects may be noticeable, they do not destroy communication. Little research has been conducted on whether more global features of discourse from specific dialects (or cultures) may affect writing. Such effects, if found, may interfere with learning to write more than do the surface-level influences that are most obvious.

Teaching Writing to Linguistically Different Students

Because people differ in their views about the influence of dialect on writing and about whether (and how much) dialect should be accepted in writing, they do not agree as to how writing should be taught to speakers of nonstandard dialects.

One approach suggested is to ignore dialect influences--to focus on the writing process, on the rhetorical situation, and on the goals of

writing (Bailey, 1973; Bizzell, 1979; Robinson, 1973; Smitherman, 1973). This view can be summarized as follows:

> The function of the composition teacher, then, should be to focus the student's attention on the intelligibility requirements of the written code, rather than to attack the student's use of language. The arbitrary standards of correctness must be ignored, the relative means of effectiveness must be stressed, the student must develop a self-confident attitude toward his language. (Baron, 1975, p. 182)

A somewhat less extreme view is suggested by Sipple (1976) and by Gilbert (1980), who would include some instruction on dialects in the composition curriculum. Fasold (1971) suggests that dialect forms may be appropriate in certain kinds of writing (e.g., personal letters). Collins (1979) advocates initial acceptance of dialect forms while the focus is on how to write; later, standard usage can be taught.

Many practitioners advocate the use of English-as-a-second-language techniques to help remove dialect influences on writing (Bruder and Hayden, 1973; Epes, Kirkpatrick, and Southwell, 1978; Reed, 1973; Schotta, 1970). Other approaches include an emphasis on speech (Gwin, 1981) and a grammar-based, language-construction emphasis (Murphy, 1981).

Gray (1975) suggests that teaching approaches may depend on the kind of dialect form. Some dialect forms are stigmatized and are not used in writing (e.g., ain't, invariant be, perfective done); however, since students may not know the standard forms to be used, the new, unknown forms should be taught as if teaching a foreign language. When actual dialect features are used, students need to learn the differences between their dialect and Standard English. When hypercorrections are made, instruction can provide students with information about appropriate forms to use.

Because speakers of nonstandard dialects do have some familiarity with oral Standard English, they may be able to use this knowledge to write in Standard English. Berdan (1981), who notes that most Black English speakers use Standard English forms at least some of the time, suggests that students do not need to learn new forms; rather, they need to learn which of their forms are appropriate for writing. Similarly, Stokes (1977) notes that Black English speakers have receptive knowledge of Standard English and that this knowledge can be used in writing. These views may also apply to speakers of other dialects.

Finally, it is frequently suggested (e.g., Whiteman, 1979) that since dialect primarily influences surface features of writing (especially manifested in spelling and syntax), the teaching of editing skills is particularly important for speakers of nonstandard dialects. Bartholomae (1980) indicates that when students read their compositions aloud, they correct many of their writing errors. Thus, the best way to teach writing to linguistically different students may be an eclectic one that incorporates a variety of approaches that may work with a variety of students.

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